

Vote on Tuesday, November 6

On Tuesday, November 6, the United States will hold a presidential election. There will also be elections to Congress, including an election for U.S. Senator in New York State. In many nations, a free election is an unusual event. Here we just seem to accept it as our due. But a free vote is a precious commodity, one that countless numbers of Americans have fought and died to protect throughout our history. And this fight is not over, as state after state tries to suppress votes for certain groups of people. In these times, exercising your hard-won right to vote is more important than ever before.

Not voting wastes the precious commodity that took decades of hard work to earn. This is tragic to be sure. But not voting does something that is actually dangerous: it sends the message to politicians that either we are satisfied with the way things are or that we don't care enough to do anything about it. Low voter turnout in our communities allows politicians to ignore our needs and starve us of resources. The consequences affect us all.

Voter Suppression

Since its founding, the United States has been marked by a struggle to restrict voter participation, a struggle linked to issues of race, class, gender, and power. Despite the Declaration of Independence's proclamation that "all men are created equal," there were great debates at this country's founding over who could vote and hold public office. Native Americans, black slaves, women, indentured servants, poor farmers, and laborers were excluded. Slowly, painfully, these groups attained the right to vote.

These battles took place not only in the distant past. Voting rights were integral to the civil rights movement in the 1960's. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 expanded Americans' right to vote like no other legislation in our history. It was adopted only after many harsh and bloody battles, including the murders of those who dared to try to vote and those who dared to register them.

And our voting rights are still not completely secure. The news has recently been rife with stories about voter suppression efforts in various states. Voter suppression campaigns were uncovered in Florida last month and earlier in Pennsylvania and Ohio, just to name a few. These are probably just the tip of the iceberg, places where the news media have discovered them, driving the perpetrators underground.

And organized efforts to discourage voting continue through the vehicle of voter ID laws. Thankfully, many of these laws have been knocked down by the courts, recognized for what they are. But Georgia, Tennessee, Indiana, and Kansas still have strict photo ID laws in place.

Laws that take the vote away from people with felony convictions are another means of altering the landscape: they have a huge racial impact, keeping many blacks and Latinos at society's margins long after they have served their time and paid their dues. The NAACP just launched a

national campaign against these policies, which should bring attention to their discriminatory results.

A Crucial Election

This election may determine whether we will have a government that supports working families; improves wages, benefits, and other work supports; and increases the number of adults enrolled in education and skills-developing programs. There is a critical need to support greater economic opportunities for the many people living on the margins of society. The return on this investment would be a stronger, smarter workforce we need to successfully compete in a global economy.

This election may also determine who joins the Supreme Court. Hard-won civil rights may either be supported or completely eradicated depending on the makeup of the Court. The election will also determine who gets to appoint heads of government agencies that make such a difference in our lives – the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to name just one.

Finally, elected officeholders decide how and where your taxes are spent. Will New York City get its rightful share of federal aid for health care, education, transportation, or job training? Will the city's public housing be strengthened? Will Social Security and Medicare be protected?

History has taught us some important lessons in acquiring political power. One is that change is possible. But change starts at the ballot box.

The polls in New York will be open from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. If you are not sure of where to vote, call 1-866-868-3692 or go online to the poll site address locator at <http://gis.nyc.gov/vote/ps/index.htm>.

David R. Jones, Esq., is President and CEO of the Community Service Society of New York (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: www.cssny.org.

From the New York Amsterdam News

October 25 – October 31, 2012